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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001777

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN DOWN ON THE FRENCH INITIATIVE

REF: BEIRUT 1764

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) General Michel Aoun remains as gloomy and dejected as he was during the last meeting with the Ambassador (reftel). While the French initiative seems to have picked up momentum elsewhere in Beirut in the last few days, Aoun shot down hope for the initiative, saying that he would not participate by submitting names to the Patriarch. He conveyed a loss of hope, subtly implying that since his own candidacy was out of the running, there was no one still in the race who was capable of finding a solution to the crisis. The right candidate, Aoun asserted, is one who can work with Hizballah. He half-heartedly claimed he was not being pessimistic about the French initiative, and that he would cooperate as best he can, but that there were redlines he could not cross. (Comment: Presumably, redlines refer to giving names that did not include his own. End comment.) End summary.

#### AOUN WON'T GIVE NAMES TO THE PATRIARCH

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and his advisor (and son-in-law) Gebran Bassil on November 13. A despondent Aoun dismissed the French initiative, mildly joking that it was very sophisticated and he did not understand it. In particular, he questioned how the Patriarch would choose names to submit to MP Saad Hariri and Speaker Nabih Berri. Shrugging, he said that any individual (apart from himself) who could settle the problems with Hizballah would be the best candidate. However, he would not give names. He said he will support any name but will not give them himself. He explained that he was merely being diplomatic when he agreed with French Charge Andre Parant to go along with the French initiative. For now, Aoun said with nonchalance, he will wait and see what the Patriarch wants from him. More than once, Aoun said the problem does not lie in the names, but about "figuring out a map towards a solution."

#### NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ON THE HORIZON

3. (C) Aoun warned that electing a president with a half plus one majority or keeping PM Fouad Siniora in power would only exacerbate the crisis. After digressing to mention that a solution could have been found in President Lahoud's proposal for a national salvation government last spring, he continued

with his pessimistic outlook on Lebanon's future, predicting that if there are no elections, there will be "a second, a third, a fourth government." He refused to accept Siniora's conditions (NFI), likening them to a bayonet, or a last resort option. He also rejected the assumption that any name Berri would agree to would have Hizballah's support, shrugging, "Let's see if Berri is backed by Hizballah." He took a break from denouncing everything on the table to suggest an interim government, saying, "It is the only constitutional and democratic way to end the crisis."

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF...?  
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¶4. (C) In an attempt to wake Aoun out of his self-induced slump, the Ambassador posited scenarios and asked how Aoun would respond. If the French initiative resulted in any name, for example, Demianos Kattar - what would you do, inquired the Ambassador. After a long pause, Aoun repeated his earlier open question, "Does he have a solution to achieve stability for Lebanon?" When the Ambassador asked if Aoun's bloc would go to parliament when the voting session was scheduled, Aoun remained quiet and then again offered, "If the candidate proposed has a solution."

POSITIVE INTERPRETATION OF NASRALLAH'S SPEECH  
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¶5. (C) Aoun offered the only positive spin we heard on Hassan Nasrallah's speech, saying that if the angry tone were ignored, he interpreted Nasrallah's speech to call for an agreement on the presidency or on an interim government. He disputed the Ambassador's interpretation that Nasrallah rejected UNSCR 1559, believing Nasrallah "did not exclude the

BEIRUT 00001777 002 OF 002

integration of weapons under a Lebanese dialogue." Aoun thought Nasrallah conveyed the impression he was open to discuss anything.

COMMENT  
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¶6. (C) Aoun appears to have decided to sit out the French initiative -- as well as sit out any other initiative that doesn't promote his own candidacy. Accustomed to playing the role of the outsider and an expert in nurturing a political movement based on resentment, Aoun probably wants to keep open the option of trying to delegitimize whatever solution the French or others find. Just as Aoun has declared Fouad Siniora's cabinet illegitimate and unrepresentative, he may be calculating that, by refusing to endorse or participate in any French-sponsored process, he can do the same with any new president, even one that emerges from a consensus process. This would not be the first time Aoun performs as spoiler of solutions others accept.

FELTMAN